THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT & EUGENICS*

By RICHARD M. TITMUSS

IT was, I think, Professor Carr Saunders who, in delivering a Galton Lecture some years ago, speculated on the problems that would confront an historian intent on tracing the development of the eugenics movement. The materials and the problems he would have to face are indeed vast; they stretch far back in the social history of England and they are studded with some of the greatest and most vigorous polemics of the past 200 years. But our historian would be most sorely tried in his task of evaluating the respective contributions of some of the chief actors in this history—giants of the stature of Darwin, Huxley, Galton, Lamarck, Malthus, Spencer, Karl Pearson, and others. I do not intend in this paper to offer any historical reflections on the work of these great men. But what I have to say will, I hope, suggest to some future historian—earnestly browsing in the Society's library—certain currents of thought, empirical perhaps, but worthy of pursuit.

The Victorian Climate

From time to time it is wise to remind ourselves that we tend to romanticise the past. And eugenists are by no means immune from this amiable weakness. Perhaps we surrender to the past too easily because we dislike the present. But whatever the reasons, and we can be sure that they are many, the result is often a distorted view of history and of the leading personalities of the day. Judgments on men and social movements are continually being revised, especially when the period of survey is so close to us as the Victorian age—the age of the great controversy: nature and nurture. If there can be as yet no finality in our historical assessments in the field of, say, politics and economics in the nineteenth century, may this not be equally true of heredity and environment? The certainties of one age become the problems of the next. That, broadly, is the theme of my paper within the context of eugenics and the social environment.

Now the Victorian age was conspicuously an age of uncompromising judgments. Philosophies concerning the nature of man, and discoveries, for instance, in the field of human biology, were converted into immutable laws. There were the principles of individualism and of self-help. There was the blind, unqualified acceptance of the "struggle for existence"—a dogma which Darwin himself certainly did not hold. State education, sanitation and health services were vigorously opposed on the grounds that they would undermine responsibility. *The Times* asserted with confidence that the English people would rather run the risk of cholera than be bullied into health. The introduction of a school medical service was fought because it was feared that it would pauperise both children and parents. In 1874, the President of the Society of Medical Officers, alarmed by the growing use of drains and water-closets, argued against this development by saying that "an increase in the rate of mortality is often a sign of prosperity; for a high death-rate means a high birth-rate, and a high birth-rate is the invariable concomitant of prosperity." The implication was that as water-closets and drains increased, prosperity would decrease. These sturdy expressions of individualism may amuse us to-day, but we should remember that they were an integral part of the Victorian outlook on the affairs of man. As such they must be studied in their context; that is to say, if we wish to understand their value and significance we must read them against the social, economic and political background of the age. In a similar way we should attempt to evaluate the controversy over heredity and environment against the Victorian background.

* A paper read before the *Eugenics Society* on November 16th, 1943.

Galton's Eugenics

Francis Galton and Gregor Mendel were, curiously enough, both born in the year 1822. But heredity was a live issue long before any sound knowledge of Mendel's discoveries on the mechanism of inheritance became generally available at the beginning of the twentieth century. Right down the ages heredity has been held to be of immense importance in human affairs. The emphasis given to hereditary factors in the Old Testament can be traced in all types of ethnic groups, from the Bantu to the Nordic. And, indeed, it was natural that they should receive such prominence when little was known about environmental influences. The belief in the importance of heredity can also be traced to parental "wishful thinking," and to such historical developments as kingship and inherited leadership. These empirical views were strengthened and given some scientific basis when Charles Darwin began to write of heredity in relation to evolution, and when his cousin, Francis Galton, from a study of fifty-five pairs of twins, coined the term "eugenics." In his book, *Inquiries into Human Faculty*, he studied what he thought were thirty-five identical and twenty fraternal twins. For reports on these twins—the influences of environment, education, and so on—he relied on anecdotal evidence from friends and relatives. An experiment controlled in this manner to-day would, of course, be rejected by competent statisticians; but in those days statistical techniques were very rudimentary. Those who criticize Galton, however, for not anticipating the refined statistical methods of to-day, show little sense of history or awareness of how far Galton was in advance of most of his contemporaries. On the basis of this work on twins, Galton was led to the conclusion: "We may, therefore, broadly conclude that the only circumstance, within the range of those by which persons of similar conditions of life are affected, that is capable of producing a marked effect on the character of adults is illness or some accident that causes physical infirmity. The impression that all this leaves on the mind is one of some wonder whether nurture can do anything at all, beyond giving instruction and professional training. There is no escape from the conclusion that nature prevails enormously over nurture when the differences of nurture do not exceed what is commonly to be found among persons of the same rank of society and in the same country." Judged by the caution of modern science, Galton was certainly sweeping in his verdict, but nevertheless he may be considered temperate in comparison with some of his contemporaries and successors. I will give two quotations which broadly summarise the views of the school of heredity in the nineteenth century. That great statistician, Karl Pearson, said, "We have two groups in the community—one parasitic on the other. The latter thinks of to-morrow and is childless, the former takes no thought and multiplies." Leonard Darwin, past President of the Society and one of the outstanding eugenists of this century, stated, "The nation as a whole is slowly and steadily deteriorating as regards its average inborn qualities," and proceeded to prophesy that we should be unable to fight a major war. At the end of the nineteenth century the dominant note concerning the biological outlook was one of inspissated gloom. What John Cotter Morison called "the devastating torrent of children" would bring ruin and decay in its wake. That rapid breeding from what was thought to be genetically poor stock would eventually lead to national decline. The views, in those days, of the school of heredity may be summed up in the words of a poet whose name I have not been able to trace:

> "Come, Malthus, and in Ciceronian prose
> Tell how a rutting population grows
> Until the produce of the land is spent
> And brats expire for lack of aliment."

Darkest England

I want now to consider why such astonishingly gloomy prophecies were being made by these early eugenists. What led them to think that national decay was inevitable unless the torrent of children from the poor was stopped? To answer this question I think we should try and recall the social conditions of the last quarter of the nine-

teenth century. For a few minutes, then, let us imagine that this paper is being read in the winter of 1890. In that year General Booth's *In Darkest England* was published—a book that vividly depicted the contemporary social scene as it was experienced by about half of the population of the country. Here is one passage describing a slum quarter in Woolwich: "The women living and following their dreadful business in this neighbourhood are so degraded that even abandoned men will refuse to accompany them home. Soldiers are forbidden to enter the place, or to go down the street, on pain of 25 days' imprisonment; pickets are stationed at either end to prevent this. The streets are much cleaner than many of the rooms we have seen. A policeman never goes down this street alone at night—one having died not long ago from injuries received there. The lowest class of all is the girls who stand at the pier-head—these sell themselves literally for a bare crust of bread and sleep in the streets." The Russian writer, Dostoevsky, when he visited London, left us this impression: ". . . . on Saturday night half a million working men and women with their children spread like a flood over the whole town, for the most part gathering in certain districts. All night, it is said, up to five o'clock in the morning, they celebrate their holiday, that is, they fill themselves like cattle with food and drink and so make up for the whole week past. The beer-houses are decorated like palaces. Drunkenness is everywhere, but it is joyless, sad, and gloomy; a strange silence seems always to prevail. Only now and then do abuse and brutal fights disturb this weary silence which weighs upon you so heavily. The women are in no way behind, and get drunk along with their husbands while the children crawl and run about among them. Many of these husbands thrash their wives dreadfully. The children of these people, almost before they are grown up, go as a rule on the streets, mingle with the crowd, and often do not return to their parents. At the Haymarket I observed mothers who brought their young daughters to trade with. Little girls, about twelve years old, catch you by the hand and beg you to come with them." It was estimated that there were in those days 3,000,000 individuals who were paupers, homeless, starving, casuals, criminals, lunatics and prostitutes in the United Kingdom. Every year there were 200,000 arrests for drunkenness. It is only fifty-nine years since the Sack of the West End and fifty-six years since Bloody Sunday. Thousands of children then slept in empty boxes and boilers covered with tarpaulins and old sacks in the Adelphi Arches, on barges, on the steps of London Bridge, and in similar places in the slums of other cities. Many of the School Attendance Officers had to be accompanied by the police when they entered the poorer quarters of the towns. Seventy per cent of the elementary school children had nits in their head and 80 per cent were assessed as dirty. About 20 per cent of adults getting married were illiterate and signed their names by mark. When the school medical service was introduced—only thirty-five years ago—one-quarter of the children had defective eyesight, four-fifths exhibited dental decay, while about one-quarter of the children suffered in various degrees from discharging ears, ringworm, rickets, malnutrition, nose and throat diseases and heart and lung diseases. Lowndes, in his valuable study, *The Silent Social Revolution*, quotes one medical M.P. who told the House of Commons: "Day after day in East Bristol I used literally to shudder in contemplation of the fact that it was upon these rickety shoulders that the burden of the Empire in time to come would have to rest." Little did the school doctors dream that these very children would, as adults, have to face nine years of war and five years of economic depression before they reached the age of 50.

It was only forty years ago that the broad civilising influence of universal education—one of the most potent factors in the social environment—really began to make decisive strides. I doubt whether, with all our wisdom, we have as yet fully valued the all-pervading, subtle and progressive effects of education, mental discipline and school life, on the character and biological make-up of successive generations. It is a slow process

for one generation of parents to pass on to the next, through the formative influence of family life, a rising standard of health and education. We are only now beginning to penetrate the deeper levels of home and family training as our knowledge of psychology and physiology expands and sheds its early extravagances. When we return to our historical perspective we realise how meagre our knowledge was at the end of the last century of these influences, how little we understood the mechanisms of health and nutrition, how poorly we valued universal education. It is a mistake to think that universal education began to operate when the Act of 1870 was passed. Twenty-five years were to elapse before it applied to all children, and even then—only fifty years ago —the school-leaving age for over 75 per cent. of the population was ten. And the teaching was such that it was common for one uncertificated teacher to control a class of 70 to 120 children. Historians have remarked on the fact that we were then sixty years behind other Western nations in our provision for secondary and technical education. Only forty years ago the supply of educated adults was so inadequate that German clerks were being imported into the City of London. And when some of the teachers attempted to improve the school syllabus they had to face such letters as this one signed "An Indignant Parent": "Are we to be taxed in order that the faith for which Ridley and Latimer suffered may be crushed? Let us expel this cockatrice from our midst, Sir, and let the flag of Britain wave unsullied in the breeze. Sir, we were informed that our poor children were to be taught reading, writing and arithmetic only. Now this schoolmaster teaches them the contents of their own insides and thus adds to the rudeness which is innate in the lower orders. If the Author of the Universe had meant us to know what our livers are like, he would not have hidden them away in security."

The Changing Social Scene

This brief descriptive picture of health, education and social conditions in the 1880's and the 1890's throws some light on the context of Francis Galton's work on heredity. It is by modern standards an appalling environment in which perhaps 75 per cent of the nation lived, bore children, and died. We cannot, whether we be scientist or layman, escape from being influenced consciously or unconsciously by the contemporary social climate and prevailing moral values. Thus it was even with so profound a thinker as Galton, and still more with others who shared his views on the overriding importance of inheritance. At the end of the century the birth-rate was twice as high as it is to-day, and it has been estimated that somewhere between 1891 and 1911 the fertility of the very poor exceeded that of the well-to-do by perhaps 80 to 100 per cent. It is probable that the class differential in England was then at its maximum range. The environmentalist is unjustified in condemning, by modern standards, Galton's inquiries without first understanding this Victorian backcloth. Conversely, those who hold strongly to-day the Galtonian viewpoint are equally unjustified because they refuse to evaluate the social history of the last fifty years and because they ignore the immense advances made by the social sciences. There are still, despite Lord Horder's book on *Obscurantism*,* too many obscurantists about.

In this attempt to recapture the social realities of fifty years ago we may, I think, conclude that Galton found much to justify his assertions. But Galton did not anticipate that the great technological advances registered during the nineteenth century were likely, sooner or later, to be paralleled by similar progress in the study and diagnosis of man. As I have already said, the certainties of the nineteenth century, in economics, medicine, biology and codes of behaviour, were destined to become the problems of the twentieth century. If it be held that Galton was justified, then have the predictions that he and others made been verified by time? Has the quality of the nation been steadily deteriorating since the 1890's? Are we poorer to-day in intelligence, health and capacity for citizenship than we were fifty years ago? Has the existence during this

* Watts, 1938.

period of marked differences in the fertility of rich and poor led to a decay in the inborn endowment of the nation? Is it a fact that the immense growth in State provision for health, education, welfare, pensions and so on has undermined responsibility and pauperized the nation? I submit that these questions are important and relevant to-day, first in order to understand the past, and, secondly, so that we may march, with courage, into the future.

Do not let us, in considering our answers to these questions, make the same mistake as many of the Victorians in thinking that we have reached finality in these matters. The sciences of nutrition, of psychology and of genetics, are still young; we are only now beginning to grasp first principles. What do we know, for instance, of the significance of the uterine environment and the period of social training before intelligence tests can be applied? What do we know as yet of the inheritance of intelligence; of the transmission of the good genes?

We know enough about the transmission of certain bad genes to support a policy of voluntary sterilization, under suitable safeguards, such as was proposed in the Brock Report. We know that mental defectives, whether their condition is genetical or the result of acquired disease, cannot be desirable parents; and we believe that they, as well as persons suffering from a few serious and fortunately rare hereditary diseases, should be relieved of the burden of their fertility. But what can we know, in the vastly unequal opportunities offered by a highly stratified society, of the biological endowment and potentialities of the great masses of our fellow men?

It has been said that "evil has many descendants"; this is equally true of good. Have we not still to harvest the biological fruits of a slowly improving environment? How long does it take a rising standard of health and education to leave its mark on a new generation? In short, how powerful are the selective forces of a good environment? Ten days ago the Ministry of Labour registered for service women aged 50—many, if not the majority, will have been born and nurtured in the conditions I have described. They have had a lot to put up with; nine years of war and five years of unparalleled depression, yet I do not discern any deterioration in comparing them with their grandmothers. I do not share the gloom of those who look with fear on the fertility differential to-day. Cattell, for instance, asserted in 1937 that in 300 years half the population would be mentally defective. We do not know for certain that the differential exists to-day to any considerable extent, but it is certainly smaller than it was fifty years ago. But I am disturbed when I view the mortality differential, because the social environment is, or should be, under man's control and, therefore, stands first in priority. In my recent book, *Birth, Poverty and Wealth*, I showed that despite an all-round improvement in infant mortality among all social groups, the relative differences between, on the one hand, the well-to-do and, on the other, the skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled workers, increased between 1911 and 1931. These greater differences were not discernible in the first month of life when, as Sir Arthur McNalty has pointed out, the effects of defective *stamina vitæ* would be most influential. When, however, environmental diseases are considered, the gulf between the poor and the well-to-do rose from about 300 per cent in 1911 to, roughly, 500 per cent in 1931. These deaths were, and are, preventable; this inequality is unnecessary. They were the product of an evil environment. If the lessons of the progress we have made since 1890 are not wholly bad, then we must not commit the mistakes that our fathers made. If we wish to reap a richer harvest—in terms of quality—in the future, when the quantity of our population will be declining, then it is for us not to be content only with weeding out the demonstrably unfit; we must look equally to the improvement of the social environment. "Can it be denied," wrote Matthew Arnold, "that to live in a society of equals tends in general to make a man's spirits expand and his faculties work easily and actively; while, to live in a society of superiors, although it may occasionally be a very good discipline, yet in

general tends to tame the spirits and to make the play of the faculties less secure and active? Can it be denied, that to be heavily overshadowed, to be profoundly insignificant, has on the whole a depressing and benumbing effect on the character?"

EUGENICS SOCIETY

Annual Meeting and Election of Officers and Council

THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING was held at the Rooms of the Royal Society, Burlington House, Piccadilly, W.1, on Tuesday, May 23rd, 1944, at 4.30 p.m., with the President, Lord Horder, in the Chair. The Honorary Secretary read the notice convening the Meeting.

MINUTES. The Minutes of the Annual General Meeting, held on July 13th, 1943, which were contained in the Annual Report, copies of which had been circulated to Fellows and Members before the Meeting, were taken as read and signed as correct.

ANNUAL REPORT. The Chairman presented the Annual Report, and moved its adoption. This was carried unanimously.

STATEMENT OF ACCOUNTS AND BALANCE SHEET. These were presented by the Honorary Treasurer.

Mr. J. P. Brander raised the question of the legality, under Section 3 (9) of the *Society*'s Memorandum, of the Grant of £250, made in 1943, to the Family Endowment Society; and he further proposed the following Resolution: THAT in view of the doubt felt by certain Fellows and Members as to whether the policy of the Family Endowment Society in promoting the granting by the State of universal children's allowances is eugenic, it is recommended that no future grants be made to the Family Endowment Society.

The matter was discussed at some length, and the Resolution was put to the meeting; but no seconder being forthcoming, a vote was not taken. The President undertook that the legality of the grant already made would be examined.

The adoption of the Accounts and Balance Sheet, proposed by Mr. Chance and seconded by Mr. Martin, was carried unanimously.

HONORARY OFFICERS AND COUNCIL FOR THE YEAR 1944-5. The Honorary Secretary reported that no replies had been received to the notice inserted in the October-January issue of the EUGENICS REVIEW, inviting additional names for nomination to the Council.

Presidency. The Honorary Secretary said that he regretted to inform the Fellows and Members that Lord Horder's tenure of office as President had, under Article 27, now expired, and he paid a cordial tribute to the invaluable services to the *Society* of the retiring President. He was glad to say, however, that Lord Horder had consented to become an Honorary President of the *Society*. A new President had not yet been appointed.

Retirements. Under Article 28, the following were due to retire: Vice-presidents: Dr. Julian Huxley and Lord Keynes. Council: Under Article 30, the following were due to retire: Lady Denman, Mr. Graham Hutton, Mr. Lloyd and Mrs. Potton.

Honorary Officers and Council for the year 1944-5 were appointed as follows:

President: Post not yet filled.

Chairman of Council: B. S. Bramwell, M.A., LL.B., F.R.S.E.

Hon. Treasurer: C. F. Chance, M.A.

Hon. Librarian: Miss E. Corry.

Hon. Secretary: C. P. Blacker, M.A., M.D.

Vice-Presidents: Sir Charles Darwin, K.B.E., *M.C.*, M.A., Sc.D., F.R.S.,